CY WHITTAKER'S PLACE

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

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The ride through the storm to the Regent hotel gave him opportunity for more thought. But he gained little comfort from thinking. If it was a coincidence, well and good. If not—

A bellboy conducted him to the Whittaker room "on the saloon deck." It was a small room, very different from the Atkins library, and Captain Cy, in a cane seated chair, was huddled close to the steam radiator. He looked far from well.

"Evenin', Heman," he said as the congressman entered. "Pretty dirty night, ain't it? What we'd call a gray no'theaster back home. Sit down. Don't mind my not gettin' up. This heatin' arrangement feels mighty comf'table just now. If I get too far away from it I shiver my deck planks loose. Take off your things."

Mr. Atkins did not remove his overcoat. His hat he tossed on the bed. He glanced fearfully at his companion. The latter's greeting had been so casual and everyday that he took courage. And the captain looked anything but formidable as he hugged the radiator. Perhaps things were not so bad as he had feared. He resolved not to seem alarmed, at all events.

"Have a cigar, Heman?" said Captain Cy. "No? Well, all right; I will if you don't mind."

He lit the cigar. The congressman cleared his throat.

"Cyrus," he said, "I am not accustomed to run at the beck and call of my—er—acquaintances, but even though we have disagreed of late, even though to me your conduct seems quite unjustifiable, still for the sake of our boyhood friendship and because you are not well I—er—came."

Captain Cy coughed spasmodically, a cough that seemed to be tearing him to pieces. He looked at his cigar regretfully and laid it on the top of the radiator.

"Too bad," he observed. "Tobacco gen'rally lies up my talkin' machinery, but just now it seems to make me bark like a ship's dog shut up in the hold. Why, yes, Heman, I see you've come. Much obliged to you."

This politeness was still more encouraging. Atkins leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

"I presume," he said, "that you wish to ask concerning the appropriation. I regret"—

"You needn't. I guess we'll get the appropriation."

Heman's condescension vanished. He leaned forward and uncrossed his legs.

"Indeed?" he said slowly, his eyes fixed on the captain's placid face.

"Yes—indeed."

"Whittaker, what are you talking about? Do you suppose that I have been the representative of my people in congress all these years without knowing whereof I speak? They left the matter in my hands, and your interference"—

"I ain't goin' to interfere. I'm goin' to leave it in your hands too. And I cal'late you'll be able to find a way to get it. Um—hum, I guess likely you will."

The visitor rose to his feet. The time had come for another blast from Olympus. He raised the mighty right arm. But Captain Cy spoke first.

"Sit down, Heman," said the captain quietly. "Sit down. This ain't town meetin'. Never mind the appropriation now. There's other matters to be talked about first. Sit down, I tell you."

Mr. Atkins was purple in the face, but he sat down. The captain coughed again. "Heman," he began when the spasm was over, "I asked you to come here tonight for—well, blessed if I know exactly. It didn't make much difference to me whether you came or not."

"Then, sir, I must say that of all the impudent"—

"S-s-h-h, for the land sakes! Speechmakin' must be as bad as the rum habit when a feller's got it chronic as you have. No; it didn't make much difference to me whether you came or not. But, honest, you've got to be a kind of Bunker Hill monument to the folks back home. They kneel down at your foundations and look up at you and tell each other how many foot high you are and what it cost to build you and how you stand for patriotism and purity till—well, I couldn't see you tumble down without givin' you a chance to explain—I couldn't. 'Twould be like blowin' up a church."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE purple had left Congressman Atkins' face, but the speechmaking habit is not likely to be broken.

"Cyrus Whittaker," he stammered, "have you been drinking? Your language to me is abominable. Why I permit myself to remain here and listen to such"—

"If you'll keep still I'll tell you why. And if I was you I wouldn't be too anxious to find out. This everlastin' cold don't make me over and above good tempered, and when I think of what you've done to that little girl, or what you tried to do, I have to hold myself down tight—tight—and don't you forget it! Now you keep quiet and listen. It'll be best for you, Heman. Your cards ain't under the table any longer. I've seen your hand, and I know why you've been playin' it. I know the whole game. I've been west, and Everdean and I have had a talk."

Mr. Atkins had again risen from the chair. Now he fell heavily back into it. His lips moved as if he meant to speak, but he did not. At the mention of the Everdean name he made a queer choking sound in his throat.

"I know the whole business, Heman," went on the captain. "I know why you was so knocked over when you learned who Bos'n was the night of the party. I know why you took up with that blackguard Thomas and why you've spent your good money hirin' lawyers for him. I know about the mine. I know the whole thing from first to last. Shall I tell you? Do you want to hear it?"

The great man did not answer. A drop of perspiration shone on his high forehead, and the veins of his big white hands stood out as he clutched the arms of his chair. The monument was tottering on its base.

"It's a dirty mess, the whole of it," continued Captain Cy. "And yet I can see—I suppose I can see—some excuse for you at the beginnin'. When old man Everdean and his crowd bought you and John Thayer out way back there in '54, after John died, and all the money was put into your hands I cal'late you was honest then. I wouldn't wonder if you meant to hand over the $37,500 to your partner's widow. But 'twas harder and more risky to send money east in them days than 'tis now, and so you waited, thinkin' maybe that you'd fetch it to Emily when you come yourself. But you didn't come home for some years; you went tradin' down along the Feejees and around that way. That's how I reasoned it out these last few days on the train. I give you credit for bein' honest first along.

"But never mind whether you was or not—you haven't been since. You never paid over a cent of that poor feller's money—honest money, that belonged to his heirs and belongs to 'em now. You've hung on to it, stole it, used it for yours. And Emily worked and scratched for a livin' and died poor. And Mary, she died after bein' abused and deserted by that cussed husband of hers. And you thought you was safe, I cal'late. And then Bos'n turns up right in your own town, right acrost the road from you! By the big dipper, it's enough to make a feller believe that the Almighty does take a hand in straightenin' out such things when us humans bungle 'em—it is so!

"Course I ain't sure, Heman, what you meant to do when you found that the child you'd stole that money from was goin' to be under your face and eyes till you or she died. I cal'late you was afraid I'd find somethin' out, wan't you? I presume likely you thought that I, not havin' quite the reverence for you that the rest of the Bayporters have, might be sharp enough or lucky enough to smell a rat. Perhaps you suspicioned that I knew the Everdeans. Anyhow you wanted to get the child as fur out of your sight and out of my hands as you could. Ain't that so? And when her dad turned up you thought you saw your chance. Heman, you answer me this: Ain't it part of your bargain with Thomas that when he gets his little girl he shall take her and clear out, away off somewheres, for good? Ain't it now—what?"

The monument was swaying, was swinging from side to side, but it did not quite fall—not then. The congressman's cheeks hung flabby, his forehead was wet, and he shook from head to foot. But he clinched his jaws and made one last attempt at defiance.

"I—I don't know what you mean," he declared. "You—you seem to be accusing me of something—of stealing, I believe. Do you understand who I am? I have some influence and reputation, and it is dangerous to—to try to frighten me. Proofs are required in law, and"—

"S-s-h-h! You know I've got the proofs. They were easy enough to get once I happened on the track of 'em. Lord sakes, Heman, I ain't a fool! What's the use of your pretendin' to be one? There's the deed out in Frisco, with yours and John's name on it. There's the records to prove the sale. There's the receipt for the $75,000 signed by you on behalf of yourself and your partner's widow. There's old man Everdean alive and competent to testify. There's John Thayer's will on file over to Orham. Proofs! Why, you thief, if it's proofs you want I've got enough to send you to state prison for the rest of your life! Don't you dare say 'proofs' to me again! Heman Atkins, you owe me, as Bos'n's guardian, $37,500, with interest since 1854. What you goin' to do about it?"

Here was one ray, a feeble ray, of light.

"You're not her guardian," cried Atkins. "The courts have thrown you out, and your appeal won't stand either. If any money is due it belongs to her father. She isn't of age! No, sir, her father"—

Captain Cy's patience had been giving away. Now he lost it altogether. He strode across the room and shook his forefinger in his victim's face.

"So!" he cried. "That's your tack, is it? By the big dipper, you go to her father—just you go to him and tell him! Just hint to him that you owe his daughter thirty-odd thousand dollars and see what he'll do. Good heavens above, he was ready to sell her out to me for $50 wuth of sand bank in Orham—almost ready, he was, till you offered a higher price to him to fight. Why, he'll have your hide nailed up on the barn door! If you don't pay him every red copper down on the nail he'll wring you dry. And then he'll blackmail you forever and ever, amen—unless, of course, I go home and stop the blackmail by printing my story in the Breeze. I've a precious good mind to do it. By the Almighty, I will do it unless you come off that high horse of yours and talk like a man."

And then the monument fell—fell prostrate, with a sickly, pitiful crash. If we of Bayport could have seen our congressman then! The great man, great no longer, broke down completely. He cried like a baby. It was all true—all true. He had not meant to steal at first. He had been led into using the money in his business. Then he had meant to send it to the heirs, but he didn't know their whereabouts. Captain Cy smiled at this excuse. And now he couldn't pay—he couldn't. He had hardly that sum in the world. He had lost money in stocks. His property in the south had gone to the bad. He would be ruined. He would have to go to prison. He was getting to be an old man. And there was Alicia, his daughter! Think of her! Think of the disgrace! And so on, over and over, with the one recurring burden—what was the captain going to do—what was he going to do? It was a miserable, dreadful exhibition, and Captain Cy could feel no pride in his triumph.

"There, there!" he said at last. "Stop it, man; stop it, for goodness sakes! Pull yourself together. I guess we can fix it up somehow. I ain't goin' to be too hard on you. If it wan't for your meanness in bein' willin' to let Bos'n suffer her life long with that drunken beast of a dad of hers I'd feel almost like tellin' you to get up and forget it. But that's got to be stopped. Now, you listen to me."

Heman listened. He was on his knees beside the bed, his face buried in his arms, and his gray hair, the leonine Atkins hair, which he was wont to toss backward in the heated periods of his eloquence, tumbled and draggled. Captain Cy looked down at him.

"This whole business about Bos'n must be stopped," he said, "and stopped right off. You tell your lawyers to drop the case. Her dad is only hangin' around because you pay him to. He don't want her; he don't care

CAPTAIN CY LOOKED DOWN AT HIM.

what becomes of her. If you pay him enough he'll go, won't he, and not come back?"

The congressman raised his head.

"Why, yes," he faltered; "I think he will. Yes, I think I could arrange that. But, Cyrus"—

The captain held up his hand.

"I intend to look out for Bos'n," he said. "She cares for me more'n any one else in the world. She's as much to me as my own child ever could be, and I'll see that she is happy and provided for. I'm religious enough to believe she was sent to me, and I intend to stick to my trust. As for the money"—

"Yes, yes—the money?"

"Well, I won't be too hard on you that way, either. We'll talk that over later on. Maybe we can arrange for you to pay it a little at a time. You can sign a paper showin' that you owe it, and we'll fix the payin' to suit all hands. 'Tain't as if the child was in want. I've got some money of my own, and what's mine's hers. I think we needn't worry about the money part."

"God bless you, Cyrus! I"—

"Yes, all right. I'm sure your askin' for the blessin' 'll be a great help. Now, you do your part and I'll do mine. No one knows of this business but me. I didn't tell Everdean a word. He don't know why I hustled out there and back nor why I asked so many questions. And he ain't the kind to pry into what don't concern him. So you're pretty safe, I cal'late. Now, if you don't mind, I wish you'd run along home. I'm—I'm used up, sort of."

Mr. Atkins arose from his knees. Even then, broken as he was—he looked ten years older than when he entered the room—he could hardly believe what he had just heard.

"You mean," he faltered—"Cyrus, do you mean that—that you're not going to reveal this—this"—

"That I'm not goin' to tell on you? Yup; that's what I mean. You get rid of Thomas and squelch that law case and I'll keep mum. You can trust me for that."

"But—but, Cyrus, the people at home? Your story in the Breeze! You're not"—

"No; they needn't know, either. It'll be between you and me."

"God bless you! I'll never forget"—

"That's right. You mustn't. Forget tin is the one thing you mustn't do. And, see here, you're boss of the political fleet in Bayport; you steer the school committee now. Phoebe Dawes ain't too popular with that committee I'd see that she was popularized."

"Yes, yes; she shall be. She shall not be disturbed. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Why, yes, I guess there is. Speakin' of popularity made me think of it. That harbor appropriation had better go through."

A very faint tinge of color came into the congressman's chalky face. He hesitated in his reply.

"I—I don't know about that, Cyrus," he said. "The bill will probably be voted on in a few days. It is made up and"—

"Then I'd strain a point and make it over. I'd work real hard on it. I'm sorry about that sugar river, but I cal'late Bayport 'll have to come first. Yes, it'll have to, Heman; it sartin will."

The reference to the "sugar river" was the final straw. Evidently this man knew everything.

"I—I'll try my best," affirmed Heman. "Thank you, Cyrus. You have been more merciful than I had a right to expect."

"Yes, I guess I have. Why do I do it?" He smiled and shook his head. "Well, I don't know. For two reasons maybe—first, I'd hate to be responsible for tippin' over such a sky towerin' idol as you've been to make ruins for Angie Phinney and the other blackbirds to peck at and caw over, and, second—well, it does sound presumin', don't it? But I kind of pity you, Say, Heman," he added, with a chuckle, "that's a kind of distinction in a way, ain't it? A good many folks have hurrahed over you and worshiped you. Some of 'em, I guess likely, have envied you; but, by the big dipper, I do believe I'm the only one in this round world that ever pitied you! Goodby! The elevator's right down the hall."

It required some resolution for the Honorable Atkins to walk down that corridor and press the elevator button. But he did it somehow. A guest came out of one of the rooms and approached him as he stood there. It was a man he knew. Heman squared his shoulders and set every nerve and muscle.

"Good evening, Mr. Atkins," said the man. "A miserable night, isn't it?"

"Miserable, indeed," replied the congressman. The strength in his voice surprised him. The man passed on. Heman descended in the elevator and walked steadily through the crowded lobby and out to the curb, where his cab was waiting. The driver noticed nothing strange in his fare's appearance. He noticed nothing strange when the Atkins residence was reached and its tenant mounted the stone steps and opened the door with his latchkey. But if he had seen the dignified form collapse in a library chair and moan and rock back and forth until the morning hours he would have wondered very much indeed.

Meanwhile Captain Cy, coughing and shivering by the radiator, had been summoned from that warm haven by a knock at his door. A bellboy stood at the threshold, holding a brown envelope in his hand.

"The clerk sent this up to you, sir," he said. "It came a week ago. When you went away you didn't leave any address, and whatever letters came for you were sent back to Bayport, Mass. The clerk says you registered from there, sir. But he kept this telegram. It was in your box, and the day clerk forgot to give it to you this afternoon."

The captain tore open the envelope. The telegram was from his lawyer, Mr. Peabody. It was dated a week before and read as follows:

Come home at once. Important.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE blizzard began that night. Bayport has a generous allowance of storms and gales during a winter, although, as a usual thing, there is more rain than snow and more wind than either. But we can count with certainty on at least one blizzard between November and April, and about the time when Captain Cy, feverish and ill, the delayed telegram in his pocket and a great fear in his heart, boarded the sleeper of the eastbound train at Washington, snow was beginning to fall in our village.

Next morning, when Georgianna came downstairs to prepare Bosn's breakfast—the housekeeper had ceased to "go home nights" since the captain's absence—the world outside was a tumbled, driving whirl of white. The woodshed and barn, dimly seen through the smother, were but gray shapes, emerging now and then only to be wiped from the vision as by a great flapping cloth wielded by the mighty hand of the wind. The old house shook in the blasts, the window panes rattled as if handfuls of small shot were being thrown against them, and the carpet on the floor of the dining room puffed up in miniature billows.

School was out of the question, and Bos'n, her breakfast eaten, prepared to put in a cozy day with her dolls and Christmas playthings.

"When do you s'pose Uncle Cyrus will get home?" she asked of the housekeeper. She had asked the same thing at least three times a day during the fortnight, and Georgianna's answer was always just as unsatisfactory:

"I don't know, dearie. I'm sure. He'll be here pretty soon, though, don't you fret."

"Oh, I ain't going to fret. I know he'll come. He said he would, and Uncle Cy always does what he says he will."

About 12 Asaph made his appearance, a white statue.

"Godfrey scissors!" he panted, shaking his snow plastered cap over the coal hod. "Say, this is one of 'em ain't it? Don't know's I ever see more of a one. Drift out by the front fence pretty nigh up to my waist. This'll be a nasty night along the Orham beach. The life savers 'll have their hands full. Whew! I'm about tuckered out."

"Been to the postoffice?" asked Georgianna in a low tone.

"Yup. I been there. Mornin' mail just this minute sorted. Train's two hours late. Gabe says more'n likely the evenin' train won't be able to get through at all if this keeps up."

"Was there anything from"—

Mr. Tiddiit glanced at Bos'n and shook his head.

"Not a word," he said. "Funny, ain't it? It don't seem a bit like him. And he can't be to Washin'ton, because all them letters came back. I—I swan to man, I'm beginnin' to get worried."

"Worried? I'm pretty nigh crazy! What does Phoebe Dawes say?"

"She don't say much. It's pretty tough, when everything else is work'n' out so fine, thanks to her, to have this happen. No; she don't say much, but she acts pretty solemn."

"Say, Mr. Tiddiit?"

"Yes—what is it?"

"You don't s'pose anything that happened betwixt her and Cap'n Whittaker that afternoon is responsible for—for his stayin' away so, do you? You know what he told me to tell her—about her not comin' here?"

Asaph fidgeted with the wet cap.

"Aw, that ain't nothin'," he stammered—"that is, I hope it ain't. I did say somethin' to him that—but Phoebe understands. She's a smart woman."

"You haven't told them boardin' house tattletales about the—Emmie, you go fetch me a card of matches from the kitchen, won't you—of what's been found out about that Thomas thing?"

"Course I ain't. Didn't Peabody say not to tell a soul till we was sure? S'pose I'd tell Keturah and Angie? Might's well paint it on a sign and be done with it. No, no! I've kept mum, and you do the same. Well, I must be goin'. Hope to goodness we hear some good news from Whit by tomorrer."

But when tomorrow came news of any kind was unobtainable. No trains could get through, and the telephone and telegraph wires were out of commission owing to the great storm. Bayport was buried under a white coverlet three feet thick on a level, which shone in the winter sun as if powdered with diamond dust. The street shoveling brigade, meaning most of the active male citizens, was busy with plows and shovels. Simmons' was deserted in the evening, for most of the regular habitues went to bed after supper tired out.

Two days of this, then Gabe Lumley, his depot wagon replaced by a sleigh, drove the panting Daniel into the yard of the Cy Whittaker place. Gabe was much excited. He had news of importance to communicate and was puffed up in consequence.

"The wire's all right again, Georgianna," he said to the housekeeper, who had hurried to the door to meet him. "Fust message just come through. Guess who it's for?"

"Stop your foolishness, Gabe Lumley!" ordered Miss Taylor. "Hand over that telegram this minute! Don't you stop to talk! Hand it over!"

Gabe didn't intend to be "corked" thus peremptorily.

"It's pretty important news, Georgianna," he declared. "Kind of bad news too. I think I'd ought to prepare you for it sort of. When Cap'n Obed Pepper died I"—

"Died! For the land sakes! What are you sayin'? Give me that, you fool head! Give it to me!"

She snatched the telegram from him and tore it open. It was not as bad as it might have been, but it was bad enough. Lawyer Peabody wired that Captain Cyrus Whittaker was at his home in Ostable sick in bed and threatened with pneumonia.

Captain Cy, hurrying homeward in response to the attorney's former telegram, had reached Boston the day of the blizzard. He had taken the train for Bayport that afternoon. The train had reached Ostable after 9 o'clock that night, but could get no farther. The captain, burning with fever and torn by chills, had wallowed through the drifts to his lawyer's home and collapsed on his doorstep. Now he was very ill and at times delirious.

For two weeks he lay, fighting off the threatened attack of pneumonia. But he won the fight, and at last word came to the anxious ones at Bayport that he was past the danger point and would pull through. There was rejoicing at the Cy Whittaker place. The board of strategy came and performed an impromptu war dance around the dining room table.

"Whe-e-e!" shouted Bailey Bangs, tossing Bos'n above his head. "Your Uncle Cy's weathered the Horn and is bound for clear water now. Three cheers for our side! Won't we give him a reception when we get him back here!"

To Be Continued.

Greatest of the Arts.

That music is, in many respects, the greatest of the arts needs no detailed proof. This is a clear inference to be drawn from the eulogistic remarks of Shakespeare, Browning, Schopenhauer, Walter Pater and Walt Whitman—all men who had thought deeply on the subject and who had weighed their words.

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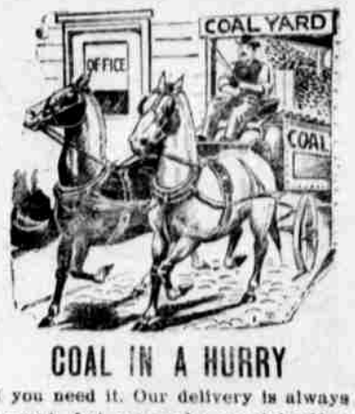

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